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ABSTRACT

The Racine Unified School District, in Racine, Wisconsin in 1973 voluntarily adopted a resolution mandating that, in effect, no school in the district could have a minority enrollment greater than 30.7%. Kindergarten classes were not included in the desegregation plan. When the desegregation plan was adopted, some segments of the minority community and one predominantly white area protested. At the time the plan was implemented, there were no incidents of physical disruption or violence, in part, because the minority community decided to accept the plan and help the school district implement it. White dissident groups found that their protests had no legal basis. As a result of desegregation attendance has not changed, although there has been some noticeable decline in the number of white students enrolled and an increase in the parochial schools' enrollment. The issue which has created some dissatisfaction within the minority community has been the fact that black children are bearing the brunt of busing. Most of the persons interviewed believed that since desegregation academic achievement has improved in school programs. The school district has taken several surveys on attitudes towards desegregation and the results have proven to be favorable. (Author/AM)

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SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN RACINE, WISCONSIN

A STAFF REPORT OF THE UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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PREFACE

The United States Commission on Civil Rights released on August 24, 1976, its report to the Nation: Fulfilling the Letter and Spirit of the Law: Desegregation of the Nation's Public Schools.

The report's findings and recommendations were based upon information gathered during a 10-month school desegregation project. This included four formal hearings (Boston, Massachusetts; Denver, Colorado; Louisville, Kentucky; and Tampa, Florida); four open meetings held by State Advisory Committees (Berkeley, California; Corpus Christi, Texas; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Stamford, Connecticut); a survey of nearly 1,300 local school districts; and 29 case studies of communities which had difficulties with desegregation, had moderate success with desegregation, or had substantial success with desegregation.

Subsequent to the report's release, considerable interest was generated concerning the specifics of the case study findings, which, owing to space limitations in the national report, were limited to a few brief paragraphs. In an effort to comply with public requests for more detailed information, Commission staff have prepared monographs for each of the case studies. These monographs were written from the extensive field notes already collected and supplemented, if needed, with further interviews in each community. They reflect, in detail, the original case study purpose of finding which local policies, practices, and programs in each community surveyed contributed to peaceful desegregation and which ones did not.

It is hoped that the following monograph will serve to further an understanding of the school desegregation process in this Nation.

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I. BACKGROUND

Unified School District No. 1 of Racine County, Wisconsin, is 100 square miles in size. The area east of I-94 between the Kenosha County line and Racine County line merged into one school district in 1961 and includes the city of Racine, two towns, and four villages. The 1970 census estimated the city population at 95,162 with a racial breakdown of 79,722 whites, 10,000 blacks, and 5,440 Hispanics.[1] The merger contributed to a more equal distribution of educational services across the district, and made it a more efficient operation. The district consists of 36 elementary, 6 junior high, and 3 senior high schools. In 1975, there was a total enrollment of 28,757 students: 80.4 percent white, 14.2 percent black, and 5.4 percent Hispanic. In that same year, the district employed 1,590 teachers of whom 1,456 or 92 percent were white, 115 or 7 percent were black, and 19 or 1 percent were Hispanic.[2]

II. HISTORY

In 1966 J.I. Case High School was opened and two junior high schools with predominantly minority enrollments were closed. The closing of these schools redistributed minority children--a move which was interpreted by some as desegregation. However, the president of the local NAACP, Julian Thomas, said, "Even though the closing of these schools made [Unified School District No. 1] look like a progressive school system, the truth was they were closed for better utilization of facilities available."[3]

The administration noted that these minority schools had declined in enrollment and that the surrounding population was changing to almost 100 percent minority. The closing of the schools caused some disbursement of minorities and, while the NAACP was not against this move, Mr. Thomas said, "We began to think in terms of...what centers could be utilized within the inner city where white kids would be brought in and minority children out."[4]

Actions taken by the board of education for reorganizing the schools because of declining enrollment did not involve transportation of white children. No plans were designed to deal with the racial imbalance in schools at that time.

It was not until 1972 that the school board began planning to desegregate schools by busing suburban children to inner-city classrooms. Bitter protest by citizens resulted in the board's deferring any action.[5] Instead the board closed three predominantly minority schools--Beebe, Richards, and Tucker Elementary Schools--and shifted students to other schools in the area. Sister Michelle Olley, a school board member at the time, said, "...failure to develop permanent plans amount[s] to a commitment to promote segregation....These boundary lines didn't make any move toward integration...." She later said, "It's a fact we don't have to create a separate system--we maintain it...."[6]

In 1973 district figures showed a heavy concentration of minority students in 8 inner-city schools out of a total of 33. For example, Stephen Bull and Garfield Elementary Schools had minority enrollments of 88.9 and 90.2 percent, respectively.

Between 1962 and 1973 the NAACP explored the possibilities of filing a lawsuit against the school district. During that time the civil rights organization's leaders cooperated with the school district but continued to press for desegregation. It was not until 1973 that the NAACP made its position clear in a letter to the school district informing the district of the NAACP's intention not to pursue a lawsuit until the Supreme Court ruled on Detroit and Denver desegregation suits. In his letter, Mr. Thomas wrote:

> There is a great similarity between these school districts and ours. Upon receipt and review of those decisions we will then proceed with our suit...providing the Unified Board has not corrected the situation.[7]

Even though this letter had the tone of a threat, it was not, according to Mr. Thomas. "It was only for the purpose of clarifying the organization's position and to see if the process of [voluntary] school desegregation could be pursued in a spirit of cooperation," he said.[8]

III. THE DESEGREGATION PLAN

Early in the summer of 1973, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction sent State guidelines for desegregation to the district. The guidelines required all school districts to racially balance their schools within 10 percentage points of the proportion of all ethnic groups in their district. The guidelines also called for the district to better racially balance its teaching staff and to include curriculum and textbooks that would reflect ethnic culture and background.

The director of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, William Colby, was quoted as saying, "We are going to push these as far as we can. The guidelines could lead to legal action."[9] Mr. Colby later explained that the guidelines were only recommendations and did not have very much force, but he was hopeful they would become law.[10]

On September 9, 1973, the Racine Unified District Board of Education moved closer to resolving its racial desegregation problems. The Racine Journal Times observed, "Despite tirades from men wearing swastika armbands and stiff opposition from its only minority member, the board, meeting as a committee of the whole, narrowly voted to recommend approval of a proposal which set maximum quotas for minority students."[11] The proposal by Gilbert Berthelsen, president of the board, called for a minority enrollment in each school of no more than 10 percentage points above the proportion of all minority students in the district to be effective September 1975. Under the plan (as of September 1976) no school in the district could have a minority enrollment greater than 30.7 percent because the systemwide minority enrollment at that time was 20.7 percent.[12]

All these factors may have pressed the district to decide to desegregate voluntarily. A resolution adopted by the Racine School Board in October 1973 resulted in the creation of a citizens' advisory committee by the

superintendent of schools. The committee was composed of members from the Title VII Emergency School Aid Act funds committee, community organizations, and the community at large. This committee was the first of two organized to develop plans for the desegregation process. The first committee focused on establishing five basic guidelines to be followed during implementation of desegregation. The guidelines were:

1. Minimum busing--including no extreme distances, limited amount of time on the bus, and limits on the age of the children bused.

2. Integration could begin in either kindergarten, first- or second-grade, with the most popular option appearing to be first grade.

3. Equal educational opportunity should be provided for all children.

4. Children should be moved within groups (neighborhood groups).

5. Flexibility and choice should be provided, either through varied programs in individual schools or through the development of magnet or option schools.

The advisory committee also emphasized that any desegregation plan should affect and include all of the elementary schools in the unified district.[13]

In July 1974, using the above criteria, district administration and staff developed and presented to the board four plans:

Reorganization Plan

This plan proposed reorganizing nine fifth- and sixth-grade (middle) schools. Each middle school would be grouped with three or four elementary schools. All fifth- and sixth-grade students within a group of schools would attend the middle school. The other schools within the group would contain grades one through four, including those students reassigned from the designated middle school. All schools (middle and one through four) would have kindergartens composed of neighborhood children.

Redistribution Plan

The redistribution plan proposed adoption of the criterion presented in the board of education motion that no school shall exceed the district minority percentage by more than 10 percentage points. Minority students in grades one through six would be transferred from the 7 inner-city schools and reassigned to the 23 outer-city schools to reach the prescribed percentage. Redistribution would be based on the current minority enrollment and capacity of each outer-city school. The end result of this plan would be student enrollments lower than capacity, allowing room for magnet programs, optional elementary or secondary programs, special education programs, traditional one through six programs, or building abandonment or sale. The plan also proposed that kindergartens continue to operate in the neighborhood schools.

Exchange Plan

This plan proposed making use of all public school facilities and satisfying a motion by the board to exchange minority students from 7 inner-city schools with white students from the 23 outer-city schools. The percentage of minority students for outer-city schools would be established by the board and any additional number of minority students could then be added to a school keeping the enrollment at the previous level. Once this number was determined for all outer-city schools, the exchange of students would begin. Selection of actual students would probably be based on neighborhoods within the present school attendance areas. The exchange would operate whether or not kindergarten students were included.

Cluster Plan

The cluster plan proposed the division of the district into four clusters or organizational patterns of education: modified self-contained, multi-unit, nongraded continuous progress, and academic. The parents within each cluster would choose, on a priority basis, the type of school they wished their child or children to attend. The school would be organized to meet the needs of students choosing each type of school. Students would be assigned to the schools of their choice based on nearness to their homes and the minority percentage established by the board.

The board of education approved the redistribution plan on August 15, 1974. Reverend Eugene Boutilier, a member of the Racine Urban Ministry, expressed his belief regarding the general feeling about the plan by some people saying, "Most knowledgable members of the community were not in favor of this plan."[14] Members of the clergy present at the board meeting continually voiced their dissatisfaction with this plan. According to them, the burden of busing was placed on the minority community.

The representative from the Racine Education Association (REA) was of the opinion that the board would not make any irrevocable decisions until elementary teachers had an opportunity to meet, discuss the various plans, and make their own recommendations.[15] Other organizations such as the Racine Urban League and the Racine County Action Program commended the board for its early action on school desegregation. These two organizations did not favor any particular plan at that meeting, but later opposed the redistribution plan. The cluster plan received the most support at the meeting, according to newspaper accounts and persons interviewed.[16]

Declining school enrollment had convinced school officials that schools on the fringe of the district could accommodate student transfers from the inner city. The plan would also permit some inner-city schools to be used for magnet and alternative school programs. The board agreed on the redistribution plan, even though the plan would require transporting primarily minority children. Superintendent C. Richard Nelson said, "It would be the most acceptable plan to the white community."[17]

The approved plan was subject to some specific modifications. The areas which the board asked the superintendent to improve were: the lack of specificity in describing the use of vacated spaces in the inner city; the lack of any attempt to straighten some present boundary lines; and possible crowding in the outer city as a result of reassignment.[18]

The citizens' advisory committee was expanded to 45 persons and included parents, teachers, and students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds. This committee played an important role in getting support for the final plan and for its smooth implementation. The political members of the community did not voice their opinion one way or the other on desegregation, although it was noted in

local newspapers that representatives from the county Republican Party and the county Democratic Party participated in the advisory committee. Religious, business, and other community leaders were also involved in the advisory committee.

IV. COMMUNITY REACTION

Some community leaders noted that opposition to school desegregation from members of the white community primarily focused on how the reorganization plan would be implemented. Many white parents did not want their children bused to inner-city schools.[19]

Two major concerns of the minority community were the amount of travel required to desegregate the system and whether desegregation would be implemented only at the expense of the minority community.[20] The strongest opposition to desegregation was voiced by spokespersons from the American Nazi Party in Racine. They attended the board meetings and passed out literature. However, their actions did not impede the process of desegregation. Although tension existed during many of the meetings at which the various desegregation plans were discussed, no organized violence or disruptions occurred during desegregation.[21]

However, in February 1975 just prior to the final approval of the plan, strong protest developed from citizens residing in the predominantly white township of Caledonia; the spokesperson for the residents was a member of the citizens' advisory committee who worked on the plan. Five hundred residents signed a petition (which was presented to the school board) opposed to busing. The petitioners reportedly were not opposed to desegregation, but rather to the busing of children from Caledonia to the inner city of Racine.[22] Based on the provisions of the unified plan, those children who resided in Caledonia and attended North Park and the Western Complex schools would be transported to the inner city.

A spokesperson for the Caledonia residents, Roger Hay, stated, "The busing plan exceeds State and Federal busing guidelines and imposes severe hardships on many parts of the school district."[23] In a later interview, he said, "We feel the plan is unacceptable because of the busing as it affects one or two areas--the sheer movement of bodies

unnecessarily."[24] The group reportedly wanted to file a lawsuit in Federal court against the school district to enjoin the plan but found that it had no cause. A leader of the group said, "We've had to admit defeat. We found we hadn't a leg to stand on."[25]

Minorities also expressed opposition to the plan many times, but most eventually agreed to work with the schools to make the plan a success.[26]

Idela Shelton, a parent with children and grandchildren in the schools, said:

> I don't drive. What would I do if my kids got sick. How would I get them? They [the officials] say they will take care of it but they make all kinds of promises.[27]

Lois Heider, Racine PTA president, was quoted as saying:

> From what I can pick up, parents don't want their kids taken away where they can't get at them. They are concerned their kids are not going to be accepted.

Parents, she said, were not "thrilled" with the plan, but they would go along with the plan and "make it easy on the kids."[28]

NAACP Chapter President Julian Thomas noted, "The plan does not meet all of our criteria but it's not far off. We feel it's a workable plan."[29]

George Bray, director of the Franklin Neighborhood Center, said:

> My one concern is the weight of the program on the blacks and the browns, but I don't think it could have been modified. All the minorities' children are going to be outnumbered 5 to 1 and miles away from home.[30]

There were some complaints voiced by the Racine Education Association. Executive Director James Ennis said that teachers were not seriously considered in the implementation program. He also expressed concern about teacher-student ratios and the transfer system the district

was planning to use. In the Racine Journal Times, Mr. Ennis was quoted as saying that "although the plan calls for reduced student-teacher ratios overall, many teachers will actually have increased numbers of students in their classrooms, some as much as 11 over the called for 24.9 to 1 ratio."[31] In an interview with Commission staff, Mr. Ennis said that the district's motivation to desegregate was to save $500,000. With the increase in class size, there would be a decrease in faculty, he said. Teachers were not adamantly against desegregation, although there were some who tried to impede the REA from becoming involved in the desegregation effort.[32]

According to Mr. Ennis, most minority parents believe that their children were at an advantage in a smaller class setting, but that with desegregation they would be disbursed into larger and less sensitive classroom situations. He feared the situation could be overwhelming for minority children and consequently could affect their academic achievement.[33]

V. IMPLEMENTATION OF DESEGREGATION

The Racine desegregation plan reassigned approximately 2,186 students in the fall of 1975. This total reflected 14.7 percent of all children enrolled in the system. In 1974, the district transported 10,500 public school students and 4,000 parochial and private school students. With the desegregation plan in effect, an additional 1,500 students would be transported in 1975.[34]

The cost of implementing the plan was the reason given by board members Lowell McNeil and Harold Hay for voting against the plan. Mr. Hay said, "The real cost of the plan will be obvious 10 to 15 years from now when the district tries to live up to the higher staffing level."[35]

Even though the board had not studied the possible cost of the plan, a majority urged the board to act now and study the cost later.

Teachers were required to attend 2 days of human relations training prior to implementation. Many teachers have attended more than the required 2 days. There were mixed reactions about the results of that training. One principal said, "It's a necessary day and a good day. We're getting serious about this. I am certainly going to work with my staff about this."[36] One teacher said that the seminar was superfical and perhaps too late.[37] Another teacher openly criticized the racism seminar: "I've got some pretty good rapport with some of these colored students.... I don't know why we have to keep listening to this damn stuff."[38]

VI. EFFECTS OF DESEGREGATION

To assess the impact of desegregation in the Racine schools, it is necessary to examine the eight inner-city elementary schools that had more than 50 percent minority enrollments in 1973. Four of the schools were changed to include alternative or magnet programs. Stephen Bull School in 1976, for example, had a fine arts school with 20.5 percent minority enrollment and a fundamental school with 21 percent minority enrollment. (Stephen Bull was 89 percent minority in 1973.) Two of the heavily minority elementary schools were closed. Only one of the schools, Jefferson, with a 1976 minority enrollment of 42 percent, exceeded the district's guidelines of more than 10 percentage points above the districtwide 1975-76 minority percentage of 20.7 percent.

Many schools which were virtually all white in 1973 have gained substantial minority enrollment. Cady Vista School, for example, had only 2 percent minority enrollment in 1973 but 21 percent enrollment in 1976. Minority enrollment at Jerstad Junior High School increased from 2 percent in 1973 to 19 percent in 1976.[39] Kindergarten classes were not included in the redistribution plan adopted by the district, and have remained racially structured according to neighborhood housing patterns. With the exception of kindergarten classes, the Racine district has undergone what appears to be fairly effective desegregation of its schools.

In the document submitted to the board explaining the plans, the superintendent of schools wrote:

> No plan will affect all people in exactly the same way. All persons will not be equally happy or unhappy with this plan or with any plan. Significant logistical and facility realities had to be dealt with in the development of this plan....The staff feels this plan has much merit. We know it can work. We believe it would be of

> real benefit to our children and to our community and would finally eliminate all remaining imbalance that we have been faced with for a number of years.[40]

The issue of "flight" to parochial schools was never a serious problem, although an increase in enrollments was recorded in the Cady Vista area.[41] The churches for the most part discouraged parents from removing their children from public school, communicating from the pulpits and through church newsletters distributed at services.[42]

One major issue that mushroomed into a confrontation between the school board and some parents occurred after the school year opened in September 1975. Two or 3 months into the school year, children from Wadewitz and Jefferson areas were denied further bus service. The parents had supported the redistribution plan because they had been told their children would be transported to their new schools. The State would reimburse the district the cost of transporting children 2 miles or more. After reviewing the distance between the two points, administrators found that the distance was under the 2-mile limit. Parents from Wadewitz and Jefferson areas were outraged and threatened to boycott the schools if bus service were not continued. The controversy was resolved when some townships assumed the cost of transportation and private sources offered to subsidize the cost in other areas.

One white student said his concern about the implementation of desegregation was the possibility of students being close-minded and unwilling to mix with other racial groups. He also spoke about the "...fear of something new and what it is going to be like could possibly get in the way of change."[43]

A black parent said, "Minorities were concerned that their children would not be treated equally."[44] Some white parents were displeased about their children's changing schools.[45] But in spite of apprehensions expressed by some, the Racine Unified District began its first day of the desegregation plan without incidents of violence.

The Milwaukee Journal reported, "After a month of school...the children, the throes of integration behind them, have quietly gone about their learning."[46] A survey conducted January 12, 1976, by the school district showed that approximately 8 out of 10 parents contacted believed

desegregation was working successfully.[47] Another survey of the nonadministrative personnel showed that 90 percent of all nonadministrative personnel believed desegregation was working.[48] Preparation for desegregation and the early involvement of the community were contributing factors in the successful implementation of the plan.[49]

VII. FINDINGS

•The Racine Unified School District in 1973 voluntarily adopted a resolution mandating that no school could exceed the district's minority percentage by more than 10 percentage points. This means that, according to 1976 enrollment figures, no school in the district could have a minority enrollment greater than 30.7 percent. With the exception of Jefferson Elementary School, which has 42.0 percent minority enrollment, all other elementary schools fall within the district's desegregation goals. However, these percentages do not include kindergarten classes which were not included in the desegregation plan.

•When the desegregation plan was adopted, some segments of the minority community and one predominantly white area protested. At the time the plan was implemented, there were no incidents of physical disruption or violence, in part because the minority community decided to accept the plan and help the school district implement it. White dissident groups found that their protests had no legal basis.

Attendance has not changed, although there has been some noticeable decline in the number of white students and an increase in the parochial schools' enrollment. The issue which has created some dissatisfaction within the minority community has been the fact that black children are bearing the brunt of busing. State funds are available for busing only for distances of 2 or more miles. As a result, some children have to walk a longer distance to school because their school falls within the 2-mile limit. The school system has stated that it does not have the funds to provide buses for those children. This has aroused a group of parents to confrontations with the board of education.

Most of the persons interviewed in Racine believe that academic achievement has improved in school programs since desegregation. The school district has taken several

surveys on attitudes towards desegregation and the results have proven to be favorable. Most agree that interracial and intercultural relations have been improved. Students seem to be adjusting very well with no serious disruptions occurring at any of the schools. Overall, the opinion of the community is that the Racine desegregation effort was smooth and successful. Most would agree that the key factor for a cooperative spirit was the school administration, which set the tone and planned carefully for smooth implementation.

NOTES

1. U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Census of Population: 1970, Vol. I, Characteristics of the Population, Part 51, Wisconsin, tables 16 (51-56) and 35 (51-165).

2. C. Richard Nelson, superintendent, Unified School District, Racine County, Wis., interview, Jan. 27, 1976 (hereafter cited as Nelson interview).

3. Julian Thomas, president of the local NAACP, telephone interview, Oct. 13, 1976 (hereafter cited as Thomas interview).

4. Thomas interview.

5. Racine Journal Times, July 12, 1973.

6. Sister Michelle Olley, president, board of education, Unified School District, Racine County, Wis., interview, Jan. 27, 1976 (hereafter cited as Olley interview).

7. Thomas interview.

8. Ibid.

9. Racine Journal Times, July 5, 1973.

10. Ibid.

11. Racine Journal Times, Oct. 5, 1973.

12. Ibid.

13. Because the high schools were already desegregated, any desegregation plan that would be drawn up would focus on elementary school racial balance.

14. Rev. Eugene L. Boutilier, Racine Urban Ministry, Racine, Wis., interview, Jan. 28, 1976 (hereafter cited as Boutilier interview).

15. Racine Journal Times, July 1974.

16. Racine Journal Times, July 9, 1974.

17. Nelson interview.

18. Unified School District of Racine County, The Plan to Eliminate Racial Imbalance, A Report to the Board of Education (Jan. 13, 1975), p. 4 (hereafter cited as Plan to Eliminate Racial Imbalance).

19. Staff interview in Racine, Wis., Jan. 28, 1976.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Racine Journal Times, Jan. 29, 1975.

23. Racine Journal Times, Feb. 4, 1975.

24. Racine Journal Times, Apr. 4, 1975.

25. Racine Journal Times, Aug. 16, 1975.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Thomas interview.

30. Staff interviews in Racine, Wis., Jan. 28, 1976.

31. Racine Journal Times, Apr. 4, 1975.

32. James Ennis, executive director, Racine Education Association, interview, Racine, Wis., Jan. 28, 1976 (hereafter cited as Ennis interview).

33. Ennis interview.

34. Nelson interview.

35. Racine Journal Times, February 1974.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Unified School District of Racine County, Division of Pupil Personnel, Racial Distribution Percentages by School (1975-76).

40. Plan to Eliminate Racial Imbalance, p. 6.

41. Milwaukee Sentinel, Sept. 3, 1975.

42. Staff interviews in Racine, Wis., Jan. 28, 1976, and Nov. 9, 1976.

43. Staff interviews in Racine, Wis., Jan. 28, 1976.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Milwaukee Journal, Oct. 5, 1975.

47. Racine, Wis., Unified School District No. 1, Department of Research and Development, Division of Instructional Services, A Telephone Survey of Parents of Elementary School Children Concerning Desegregation (Jan. 12, 1976).

48. Racine, Wis., Unified School District No. 1, Department of Research and Development, Division of Instructional Services, A Survey of Elementary School Employees Concerning Desegregation (Feb. 9, 1976).

49. Ibid.

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